Organization Session Speech Will Weatherford, Speaker of the Florida House Tuesday, November 20, 2012 Remarks As Prepared

In speeches like this, people often say, "we are living in unprecedented times." Perhaps that's true. It's not something we can judge, but rather history judges for us.

What I do know is that we are living in a time when the people of Florida expect us to act. Despite our efforts, more than eight percent of Floridians still cannot find a job. Half of Florida's homeowners are underwater on their mortgages. More than three and a half million Floridians are on food stamps. One third of all Florida high school students do not graduate.

These are problems that are often avoided because they seem insurmountable. Yet, these are problems that we cannot afford to ignore. Florida must take the reins and determine our own destiny.

So many of us were watching the national elections that just ended two weeks ago. Both sides were pinning a great deal of hope for the outcome. Whether you were happy or disappointed with the results, the truth is, the election is over. We have a President. To those who wish him to fail or the Congress to fail, you are wishing for America to fail.

While we long for Washington D.C. to put away the pettiness and end the gridlock, we cannot wait for them to figure it out. We cannot expect them to solve our problems. Florida has an opportunity to lead. More importantly, we have an obligation to lead.

We must fulfill the original intent of our federal system of government; letting states like Florida serve as laboratories of our democracy. We will do all we can to find innovative and lasting solutions that can be a model for our nation. Florida should be the haven where hard work is valued, ingenuity is welcomed, and success is widely achievable.

Today is not a day to lay out specific policy plans. Members, rest assured that day will come. We will have a clearly defined legislative agenda.

Over the next two years, there will be many issues that are presented to this legislative body. We will prepare – to the best of our ability – approaches that will be based on the principles of the majority and the legitimate concerns of the minority. We will define success by the degree in which the solution genuinely matches the problem – not on the chamber or leader that initiated the idea. Not who gets the credit or the blame. Not the score between the House and Senate.

Because whether we realize it or not, we sometimes lose sight of what really matters. On an individual level and on an institutional level we need to have greater grasp of our purpose, our mission, and our reason for serving. We must have a clear understanding of why we're here and how our actions will impact our communities and our state.

If your remember nothing else, remember this: we are not here to serve as passive brokers for the special interest groups. We are here to be the chamber of ideas and solutions. We are also here to lead, to govern and to offer bold, transformational ideas. Every member of this Chamber has a personal responsibility to learn, to know and to understand these issues so that we may be knowledgeable brokers of lasting solutions.

We should do this in a way that respects this institution and all those who have been chosen to serve by Floridians from every walk of life and across every geographic boundary, boundaries that frankly, after two years of redistricting meetings, I am painfully familiar with.

Also, we must work together. As I stand before you today, I do not have to make a bold statement or a new commitment to work in a bipartisan manner with the minority party. On this matter, you can expect my future actions to match my prior years of bipartisanship. What I can commit to is that you will always be treated with fairness and respect – no matter which party you represent.

Today, you have elected me Speaker of this House. Not just the Speaker of the Republican Majority, but of the entire House – Republicans and Democrats. And I plan to embrace that role.

But let me be clear: bipartisanship is a two way street. There is an opportunity for the loyal opposition. My colleagues on the back row, you have the discretion on how you will engage in this process. Will you use your power and position to surprise and embarrass the majority in order to grab a good headline? Will you challenge us on the policy or politics?

The choice is yours and I have faith you.

I welcome and value the spirited debate and the clash of ideas. It is good and healthy for this process and it produces better solutions. What we all have to understand is that our enemies are not sitting in this chamber or down the hall across the rotunda.

Our enemies are real and they are worthy of the fight. Our enemies are unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, broken systems, broken government and burdensome regulation. These are the enemies that are wreaking havoc on our people and on our state.

I believe that government is not the answer to each of these problems, but our actions can be helpful or hurtful to the individuals who are fighting to achieve the American dream.

It is up to us to choose how we will act. We will define our time. We will determine whether we are going to be big enough for the moment. We will shrink or we will rise.

This term of two years goes by so fast. Today, the gavel was passed to me by Speaker Allan Bense. In the blink of the eye, I will pass it on to another Speaker.

Two years is so short, and the task is so daunting. You may ask yourself, what can we really do in two years? My friends, we can do a lot. Consider this: the U.S. Constitution was written in 116 days. The Empire State Building was built in one year and 45 days. The Apple iPhone was designed in under two years. The code for Facebook was written in 42 days. Perhaps one of the greatest speeches of all time was written in under two days. No, it wasn't this speech. It was the Gettysburg Address.

We have no excuse. We will need a clear focus, a collaborative purpose and a leadership of conscience that is willing to do what is right.

As you probably noticed, in each of your offices, I gave you a countdown clock. The date is set for Election Day in 2014. It is a digital reminder of the sands of time that are falling on our service here. The voters gave us two years. Not four, not eight, two.

Our time is short. The clock is ticking. Let us make the most of every single second.

There are people who are counting on us. I am counting on you. So that when that clock runs out may it be said of us that we were bold, we served with a purpose and we fulfilled our promise to Florida.

I am so honored to be your Speaker. Thank you. God Bless you and God Bless our Florida.